



Remarks Prepared for
Commencement Exercises
Cape Cod Community College
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I am honored by your invitation to share in this special occasion in the lives of the graduates and the faculty and friends.

To prepare remarks for such an auspicious occasion is a challenge. I take my theme today from some reflections upon the Guinness Book of World Records.

I wonder how many of you have seen or read one of the Guinness Books.

When I recently looked over the latest edition I was amazed at the listings. You can find a record of the longest chess game and the shortest pygmy, the first calendar and the last dinosaur.

I turned to the listings having to do with higher education. There were not many entries.

I found a record for the longest lecture -- 59½ hours -- by Professor James Gray of Evergreen College in San Jose, California on April 14 and 15, 1980. The title of the lecture -- wouldn't you know it? -- was "Everything You Ever Wanted To Know About Sociology!"

But I found that there are no entries in the Guinness Book of World Records for Commencement speeches.

But, as far as basic research goes, Commencement speeches remain what Thomas Jefferson called the young American West -- Terra Incognita, unknown and unmeasured territory.

Someday, perhaps, some future Lewis and Clark will lead an expedition into the academic interior. And no less than their predecessors, these intrepid surveyors will hack through dangerous terrain.

Behind each tree, carnivorous cliches will await them. The underbrush will be thick with centuries of advice. The skies will thunder with warnings as old as time. And the only true landmark for their search will be a distant mountain called the future -- consigned by graduation speakers forever to lie ahead of us.

No one knows what booty these explorers will bag for the Guinness Book of Commencement Speeches. Perhaps they will return clutching prizes like -- the deepest optimism, the tallest order, the highest praise, or the biggest challenge.

Perhaps they will discover who, in humanity's long history, first reminded graduates that "Commencement" means "beginning."

Perhaps they will emerge with that rarest of Trophies: the only speech that ever failed to point out that the youth of today are the leaders of tomorrow.

This evening I have three candidates to propose for that unwritten record book.

Number one is the first Commencement speech. It was given by Socrates to the young men of Greece -- and it was recorded for us by his best pupil, Plato. And yet, if you read it today, it may not seem like a speech at all. It is more like a conversation, a dialogue between teacher and student.

Socrates asks what his pupils have learned; his students tell him; and then Socrates invariably asks, "How do you know" -- How do you know?

Socrates probes them for their vision of the good life; his students reply; and then Socrates impales their convictions with a single sharp question.

Socrates no sooner gets them to display the tapestry of their knowledge than he patiently unravels the long years of schooling.

And slowly, but certainly, his message dawns on the class of '24 -- that is, the class of Athens of 424 B.C.

And the message is this:

Knowledge is not only a body of facts, but also a way of thinking. It is not only absorbing what is said, but also criticizing what is claimed. It is not only inheriting what is believed, but also actively remaking and invigorating that heritage.

Here at Cape Cod Community College you have had an opportunity to grasp principles it took Galileo a lifetime to discover. You have been touched by masterpieces it took civilization centuries to appreciate. You have acquired sophisticated skills and tools undreamt of in human history.

Yet with all this -- if you are lucky -- you have also acquired a nagging unease, a relentless unquiet. It is a purposeful anxiety, this talent you have honed. It is the talent to be dissatisfied with the world you see. It is the skepticism to mistrust the answers you hear. It is, in short, a moral capacity.

To feel pain -- where others may be hardened to it; to give love -- where others may be stingy with it; to make change -- where others may be frightened of it; to find joy -- where others may be blind to it; to respect and to cherish -- where others may be ashamed of it:

These are the gifts we celebrate today. With them, you will more than simply cope with the world we bequeath you. And you will more than merely succeed in the rich life we wish you.

For you will also make it a better world -- where doubt is the engine of discovery, and feeling is the first step toward justice.

This is the message of Socrates, history's FIRST commencement speaker.

I offer as my next candidate what I believe to be the SHORTEST Commencement address ever delivered. The speaker was an American scholar and writer to whom, I presume each of you was introduced at an early age. I refer of course to Dr. Seuss.

Several years ago, Dr. Seuss was asked to give the Commencement address at a midwestern college.

He stood up before the graduates on a brilliant spring morning, strode to the microphone, and gave a speech exactly seven lines long. It was an epic poem he had composed, called "My Uncle Terwilliger on the Art of Eating Popovers." And it went like this:

"My uncle ordered popovers from the restaurant's bill of fare.
And when they were served, he regarded them with a penetrating
stare.

Then he spoke great words of wisdom as he sat there on that chair.
'To eat these things,' said my uncle, 'you must exercise great care.
You may swallow down what's solid, but you must spit out the air.'
And as you partake of the world's bill of fare, that's darn good
advice to follow:

Do alot of spitting out of hot air -- and be careful of what
you swallow."

There is little one can add to Uncle Terwilliger's advice.
I can only contribute -- as my third candidate for the

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Guinness Book of Commencement speeches -- this story:

I graduated from college in 1954.

I forget the name of my commencement speaker.

I forget what he talked about.

But I will never forget that it was the LONGEST speech I have ever heard in my life.

This evening I will not try to wrest that singular distinction from him.

Instead, I wish you always the glorious burden of your prodigious gifts: To feel pain; to make change; to find joy; to respect; and to cherish.

Thank you very much.

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